

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
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SPECIAL EXHIBITION OF CHINESE IMPERIAL PORCELAINS

AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

IMPERIAL PORCELAINS OF THE MING AND CH'ING DYNASTIES

For four hundred years from the Yung Lo reign (1403-1424) of the Ming Dynasty until the end of the Ch'ien Lung reign (1736-1795) of the Ch'ing Dynasty porcelains of superlative quality were made for the Imperial court at Ching-te-chen in Kiangsi province, south of the Yangtze River. Usually they were marked, often in underglaze blue, with reign name at the time of their manufacture -- thus "Ta Ming Chia Ching Nien Chih" (Great Ming Chia Ching Period Made) or "K'ang Hsi Nien Chih." Where the mark is omitted usually there is a decoration of Imperial significance -- a five-clawed dragon, for example.

Great sums of money were lavished on the Imperial Kilns in the years of their best patronage -- ministers complained of the extravagance. The results, beginning over three hundred years before the development (by mutation) of white porcelain in Europe, are among the most perfect combinations of technique and taste known to the world of the useful arts. The 50 pieces to be seen in this case present a visual feast surpassed only by two collections to be seen elsewhere, those of Sir Percival David in London and of the Chinese Government in Taiwan.

EARLY MING IMPERIAL PORCELAINS

The Imperial family of porcelains in the four hundred years developed primarily from the "Shu Fu" (military-council) ware of the Yüan Dynasty (1279-1368) and then its immediate descendant, the first fourteenth century porcelains with

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decoration in underglaze blue. The broadline of development is from white - the best being that of the Yung Lo reign (1403-1424) - through "blue and white" - the Hsüan Tê (1426-1435) being particularly famous - to wares with enamelled colors in addition to underglaze blue - the tiny "three-color" cups of Ch'êng Hua (1465-1487) being the rarest and most precious of the early enamelled porcelains.

Monochrome pieces were also made. The rarest of these are the copper reds of the Yung Lo and Hsüan Tê reigns; but the most famous are the Imperial enamelled yellow porcelains - "Ming Yellow" - of the Ch'êng Hua and Hung Chih (1485-1505) reigns.

LATER MING IMPERIAL PORCELAINS

The later porcelains of the dynasty - after 1506 the beginning of the Ch'êng Tê reign - show a slight technical decline but their decoration, particularly the enamelled pieces, becomes especially rich and bold. New types of vibrant underglaze blue were produced and the number of enamel colors was increased to four - with the addition of underglaze blue making the famous Chia Ching (1522-1566) and Wan Li (1573-1619) "five-color" wares. Rare examples of the Ch'êng Tê reign (1506-1524) use Arabic characters as part of their decoration, an instance of the often close relations between the Ming court and the royal courts of Persia and Turkey. The greatest collections of Ming blue and white are still preserved in the Imperial gift porcelains kept at Istanbul and Ardebil.

CH'ING IMPERIAL PORCELAINS

While China produced quantities of highly decorative large porcelains many of which found their way to Austria, Germany and France in the eighteenth century, the Imperial Kilns at Ching-tê-chên specialized in super-refined and delicate small porcelains for the taste of the court. These are characteristically

less decorative and more subtle in their appeal than ^{the} ~~until~~ now more famous "famille verte," "famille noire", and "famille jaune" porcelains so much sought after by the great collectors of the early twentieth century.

Numerous colors and tones of enamel were now used, the "famille rose" being the basic style for the finest porcelains. Often these delicately painted decorations were combined with lines of poetry making the porcelain into a form of painting and calligraphy, the most respected Chinese arts. A special type, the so-called "Ancient Moon Pavilion ware" (Ku Yüeh Hsüan), more properly described by the Chinese as "raised enamel" (fa-lang) ware, was made expressly for the delectation of the Emperor. These, the rarest, most refined and delicate products of the art of the porcelain-making are seldom seen in public collections.

This extraordinary exhibition of CHINESE IMPERIAL PORCELAINS will be on display throughout the months of April and May in Gallery 30 of the Museum.

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